

The practical applications of Koranic learning in West Africa

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Preface

The primary authors wish to express particular thanks to the African researchers who so willingly took part in a study that was necessarily short on both funds and time, and did so because of their intense interest in the subject and in developing policy-relevant research on education in Africa.

The reader is asked to note that an Executive Summary has been exchanged in this report for a format presenting a running synopsis of the main points of the presentation in the left-hand column.

Introduction

What practical skills do Koranic students actually acquire at different levels of the West African system of Islamic learning?

This study focuses on a topic of live interest in an era of decentralization and increased need for new competence at local levels: How Koranic schooling does and can contribute to filling such human resource needs.

One must always recognize that these are “secondary” functions of Koranic education. Its primary objective has always been propagation and deepening of the faith.

Yet it may at the same time have a significant role to play in “Education for All”...

What are the “practical” competencies that students acquire at different levels of West African Koranic schooling? What are the various daily uses to which such skills are put and the networks through which they are developed and applied? Koranic schooling in its many forms constitutes a long-standing parallel system of education throughout the Sahel and in much of the larger West African region -- one that has operated for centuries, yet remains relatively unknown to development planners and donors and is therefore seldom taken into explicit account in their policies and strategies.

Any inquiry into the “practical” uses and secular impacts of Koranic learning is naturally problematic as well as topical. The present study is concerned with the levels of literacy and numeracy attained by different kinds and cohorts of Koranic students, the numbers and types of people involved relative to the larger population of the localities in question, the vocational or technical skills that may be conveyed at the same time, and the socio-economic uses to which these new competencies are typically put. This is an issue of live interest in a period of decentralization and privatization when local communities, associations and businesses are being called upon to assume new responsibilities for which current levels of formal schooling among their members may not have equipped them. What are the “human resources” on which local groups can call in their effort to assume new development functions? Koranic learning -- with its alphabetic and semi-phonetic script, numerate system, tradition of written communication and associated vocational contents -- is most certainly one of these, and any effort to better understand its “practical” contents and consequences, as well as the relations that link this form of instruction to other basic education facilities and to labor markets, therefore, has obvious merit.

At the same time, however, Koranic learning cannot and should never be reduced to strictly “utilitarian” terms. Like any predominantly religious form of instruction, Islamic schooling is designed to address first and foremost the spiritual needs of its charges and to offer them avenues for growth in the faith. There have been movements at various times and in various places -- some mentioned below -- to add technical or practical contents to the Koranic curricula or to blend it with elements of formal secular schooling. Yet, overall, Islamic schooling emerged in response to divine mandate expressed in the Koran and was designed as a means for disseminating and deepening the faith. In examining its secular impacts, we are therefore obviously dealing with what those most concerned would consider secondary or spillover effects of Koranic study -- a point to which we will return.

It is therefore important to keep in mind that the focus of this study implies no disregard or disrespect for the primarily religious vocation of Islamic schooling, but simply constitutes an attempt to begin taking account of its parallel functions and effects -- some of which are arguably that much more important precisely because they are exercised in a religiously-

...for Koranic learning constitutes an educational reservoir largely ignored by policy-makers.

This study is designed to probe the nature and extent of its programs and of its outcomes.

It is basically exploratory in nature, given the lack of reliable data on the topic.

appropriate form. The decade of the 1990s opened with a call for an expanded vision for meeting the basic learning needs of all people. Members of the international education community attending the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand emphasized the fact that the basic learning needs of youth and adults are diverse and must be met through a variety of delivery systems, including skills training, apprenticeships, and formal and nonformal education programs. They also reminded the world that education is not synonymous or co-terminous with schooling, but necessarily embraces nonformal and informal education in families, religious groups, community or occupational organizations, and the mass media as well.

Seeking to reverse the downward spiral of the eighties, a difficult decade for education in Africa with worsening statistics in many areas, decision-makers have re-visited nearly the whole gamut of strategies tried over the past thirty years. Largely overlooked has been the Koranic school, or rather the dense network of institutions of Koranic instruction that stretches from the village school to regional study centers and even foreign destinations. Particularly little is known outside Koranic education networks themselves about the results, replicability and potential broader impact of such instruction. Yet former Koranic students form a major portion of nonformal education students in many rural areas -- often advancing much faster than their peers due to their previous training -- as well as the core staff of numerous economic associations and income-generating projects.

This study was designed, therefore, to begin addressing a series of questions like the following:

- What is the coverage -- geographic, demographic, sociological -- of different levels and types of Koranic education in the regions under consideration?
- What is the predominant form of curriculum studied? What is the usual duration and timing of studies?
- What level and type of literate, numerate and technical skill do Koranic students in these center acquire in the course of their instruction?
- What other attributes or skills are acquired by these students that may be relevant to practical development concerns?
- How are these various skills and competencies applied in secular employment and daily life during or after the period of Koranic study?
- How are the institutions of Koranic education related to other providers of basic education in the same regions?

The approach was basically exploratory, as relatively little work in this vein has been done to date, and resources for the present study -- in terms both of time and funds -- were distinctly limited. Procedure and analysis, therefore, both followed the dictum that it is better to be approximately right than exactly wrong.

Research and Inquiry Methods

Three types of data were used in investigating the topic: (1) published literature review; (2) "gray" literature review (unpublished project documents and theses); and (3) brief field studies and interviews in four countries.

Local research in Africa was conducted by national research teams in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal.

Research organization, literature review and data synthesis were performed by a team at the Center for Policy Studies in Education of Florida State University.

The nature of the field research sample is indicated in Table I.

Four research teams in four separate countries -- Burkina Faso, Guinea (Conakry), Niger and Senegal -- were engaged to investigate the topic. The researchers involved and the references of the reports they developed are indicated more fully in the bibliographic appendix (cf. Bah 1966; Kane *et al.*, 1997; Moussa, 1997; and Sy & Lam, 1997). All information relating to those specific countries and Islamic training within them that is not otherwise referenced below has been derived from a synthesis of the named reports.

Research teams were given considerable latitude in developing their own research plans and instruments to investigate the topic as defined in the initial terms of reference (see Annex I), and each received a budget to cover research expenses and researcher honoraria (slightly larger in the case of those countries -- Senegal and Niger -- where more extended field study was proposed). Time, however, was short, given the abbreviated calendar set down for this particular cohort of ABEL studies; and difficulties encountered in initial transfer of funds further shortened it. The funds for execution of the studies could not be actually transferred to the people responsible until December 1996 or January 1997, the time at which the completed research was theoretically due. This meant that most of those involved had little more than a month to do the work and there was little opportunity for a second round of data collection.

The sites visited in the course of these different studies are portrayed in Table I.

At the same time, research personnel at Florida State University carried out a related review of literature and mined data gathered in the course of the earlier PADLOS-Education studies for relevant insights concerning the topic. Once all studies were submitted to the central research team, it undertook the preliminary synthesis of data presented in these pages.

Data are therefore drawn from three overlapping sources: (1) a review of research literature, largely conducted in the United States and France; (2) a review of project documentation and other non-published sources like theses and dissertations, conducted both in the US and in the participating countries; and (3) collection of field data through visits to sites of Islamic instruction in the four countries and through interviews with students, teachers, leaders and other knowledgeable parties. There is ample documentary material on the development and current status of Islam as a whole in West Africa, as well as some on Koranic education worldwide and the more formal varieties of it on the African continent. Material on local Koranic schooling in Africa, however, and particularly on the learning outcomes and the secular uses to which they are applied is nearly non-existent. The field studies, as abbreviated and schematic as they were, therefore provided a critical complement to our research.

Country	Region	Locality	Sample Characteristics
GUINEA Principal investigator plus 3 assistants; 24 resource persons interviewed.	Torodoya	Torodoya	2 Koranic schools
		Danton	2 Koranic schools
		Fallo Bantan	1 Koranic school
	Conakry	Kolona	2 Koranic schools
		Bonfi	1 Koranic school
		Fatoma	1 Koranic school
MALI Principal investigator interviewed 7 school directors & 35 tchrs.	Bamako	Bamako	7 <i>médersas</i>
		Bamako	5 Koranic schools
NIGER PI + 1 assistant	Niamey	Niamey	2 Koranic schools
	Say	Say	2 Koranic schools
SENEGAL PI + 3 assistant researchers, intervws with 5 imams and 2 marabout consultns	Dakar	Dakar	1 school; 1 institute
	Thiès	Tivaouane	1 school
		M'Bour	1 school
	Louga	Malika	1 school
	Saint-Louis	Saint-Louis	1 school
		Medina Guunas	1 school
	Kolda	Kolda	2 schools
		Tankon	1 school
	Diourbel	Diourbel	2 schools
TOTAL 4 countries, 11 researchers and 73 resource persons.	11 regions	18 communities	37 Koranic schools and institutes

TABLE I: Characteristics of Field Study Sample

Results are reported hereafter in three sections: (1) historical and socio-economic back-ground information; (2) “foreground” data on Koranic schooling processes and outcomes in the sites visited; (3) con-clusions and policy recommendations.

The results reported below are divided into two major sections, each bridging across the three kinds of data: first, background information on the history, social role and instructional form of Koranic schooling in West Africa which is essential to understanding its present status and potential applications; and, second, data on the present curricular characteristics, student flows, learning outcomes and practical uses of Islamic instruction in the region. In the background section, we “triangulate” from a sample of the existing literature and the interview results from the field to trace some of the gross outlines and backdrop of the phenomenon. In the “foreground” section thereafter, we examine the outcomes and impacts of Koranic instruction essentially on the basis of the field studies. Despite the constraints under which these were executed, they furnish a much better picture of the reality than anything else we were able to locate.

This entire set of data is then summarized in a section devoted as well to discussing the practical implications of our results and related policy recommendations to those interested in educational improvement in West

Africa.

Background: The history and social role of Koranic schooling in West Africa

Islamic education has a millenary history in West Africa. By the XVth century the region was home to Universities known throughout the Muslim world.

The Islamic faith spread across the West African interior thanks to commerce and state-building. To this day, Islamic culture is strongly associated with traditional trade networks and power structures.

The spread of Islam was everywhere accompanied by the spread of Islamic

A millenary tradition anchored in faith and commerce

Islam has an extended history in West Africa and Islamic educational systems have in fact operated there many times longer than have Western ones. The Islamic faith first spread across North Africa in the 7th century. By the 10th century, communities of Muslim merchants and scholars had been established in several commercial centers of the Western Sahara and the Sahel. By the 11th or 12th century, the rulers of kingdoms such as Takrur, Ancient Ghana and Gao had converted to Islam and had appointed Muslims who were literate in Arabic as advisors. New Sahelian kingdoms were then emerging along trans-Saharan trade routes, thriving on resources derived from taxing the North-South commerce. The Islamic faith served both as a force to combat the powers of traditional animistic religion and as a pretext for the princes of the new kingdoms to exert influence over a wider and wider area. Starting in the 14th century, the Timbuktu region of present-day Mali began its transformation into a center of Islamic learning in West Africa, and it soon became known throughout neighboring kingdoms and as far as way as the Maghreb regions and the Arabian peninsula. Other West African cities famous for Islamic learning from the 13th through the 17th centuries include Shingiti, Jenné (Mali), Agades (Niger), and Kano (Nigeria) (Bray & Clarke, 1986).

From a socio-economic point of view, Islam spread across West Africa principally through the effects of trade and war. Though personal conversion and the doctrine of God's unity and transcendence were doubtless the motive forces at the individual level, at the societal one political and commercial movements provided the vehicle through which the faith was disseminated. Trans-Saharan trade flourished in pre-colonial times and carried most of the considerable merchandise exchanged between Africa and Europe from the 11th to the 16th centuries -- until, that is, the arrival of European vessels on the West African coast and the institution of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and of the triangular commerce among Africa, Europe and the New World that it fueled. The backbone of trans-Saharan commerce consisted of networks of towns established along trade routes by initially itinerant merchants from North Africa and -- increasingly thereafter -- by related groups sedentarized in West Africa, like the "Wangara" (present-day Dyula) in the central Soudan or the Hausa in the eastern regions. The proceeds of this trade furnished much of the revenue needed for State-building, and conversion to Islamic faith often therefore began with local rulers. A strong association between Islamic networks on the one hand, and traditional commercial networks and power structures on the other, persists to this day.

The central role of learning

Teaching, learning and Koranic schooling were an automatic concomitant of Islam wherever the faith was spread. There are strong injunctions within Islamic tradition (*hadith*) for assiduous study of the Koran itself, and Islam -- to an even greater degree than Judaism and Christianity -- is a "religion of the Book." Muhammad himself is reported to have said, "The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr." Koranic

schooling...

...which served the continuing missionary role of Islam: overcoming paganism and instructing the faithful.

The Islamic system of learning was hierarchical,

and much more accessible to men than to women...

but it was at the same time decentralized, and, in a sense, democratic: it offered avenues for the devout commoner to challenge corrupt authority.

scholars therefore followed soon after the merchants and princes who spearheaded the dissemination of the faith; and schools were established in all nodular centers along the trade routes, gradually exercising influence over surrounding areas.ⁱ In fact, the term “marabout”, widely used in francophone West Africa for one who has studied the Koran, is arguably a French deformation of the Arabic *murabit*, signifying inhabitant of a *ribat* or way-station in the network of commercial and religious disseminationⁱⁱ.

It was essentially the missionary and teaching role of these “marabouts” that then enabled Islam to spread from nodular commercial centers to the surrounding villages and rural areas. This was a gradual and piecemeal task, except in specific zones of the West African interior like the Fouta Djalon (upland Guinea and neighboring plateau) where the entire population was Islamized through conquest in short order, or the Mossi plateau (in present-day Burkina Faso) which remained resistant to Islamic incursion. By the 17th and 18th centuries, however, the Islamic movement had constituted a network of institutions and learning systems spreading across the Sahelian and savanna regions of West Africa.

The educational system developed in this way had a number of characteristics that survive largely intact to the present day:

(a) It was distinctly hierarchical, in the sense that the axis of dissemination was always from intellectual master to student, from *al-fiqh* to *al-murid*, and degree of Koranic knowledge and authority established clearly differentiated statuses. These relationships gave an inherent structure to the nature, as new Koranic schools were essentially established by means of students “radiating” out from the seats of learning of their masters to open new frontiers.

(b) In addition, though the importance of women in traditional West African Islam has been underestimated, it remains true that females in general had distinctly less access to learning opportunities and status advancement in that culture than did men. Significantly, early forms of Islamic education in Arabia and North Africa addressed females as well as males: Mohammed and his wife made an explicit attempt to instruct women and girls. But such relative gender equity appears to have fallen victim to political infighting in the years after the Prophet’s death. Around 900 CE, the Abassides, in an attempt to eclipse a rival group that drew its legitimacy from Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, launched a campaign belittling the capacities of women, and they managed to institute customs more consonant with pre-Islamic Arabian tradition barring women from leadership roles in the faith.

(c) At the same time, this network had certain democratic characteristics that often go unnoticed. To begin with, neither in Islam as disseminated in Africa nor in its Arabian origins is there any priestly caste *per se*. “Marabouts” and “imams” are presumably distinguished only by their knowledge and exemplary behavior, and many different categories of males may (theoretically) accede to this status. The commoner learned in the Koran may in addition challenge temporal authority when its comportment transgresses Islamic norms, and many of the historical reform movements throughout the region have just such an origin. In addition, the system was highly

A recurrent concern to revive the faith and a tendency to adapt its expression to local practice led to considerable variation.

..but a flexible social system.

When colonial powers invaded West Africa in the late 19th century, they saw Islam as a rival force and set out to control or subvert it.

Western-style schools were perceived as a prime instrument of this policy and came to be considered seedbeds of heresy in West African Islamic culture.

Yet Islam

decentralized de facto: the activities of marabouts and imams were not centrally coordinated, and the entire religious culture tended to be organized around charismatic or especially learned leaders and their followings, which gradually crystallized into the “brotherhoods” (*tariqa*, meaning literally “the way”) of different doctrinal orientations.

(d) Even at the village level, however, the Islamic movement remained in many respects a “missionary” phenomenon, because the struggle with local animisms and sources of power was never entirely won and the concern to renew the vigor and content of the faith (*tajdid*) led both to recurrent revivals and reform movements and to a longer-term accommodation with older cultural forms. There is, in fact, a clear message in Islam that true missionary work should be directed inward to the hearth and heart as much as outward. The Prophet is reported to have said, “The most excellent *jihad* is that for the conquest of oneself.” One automatic consequence of this localizing thrust was a degree of differentiation among multiple strands of Islam in different communities and among different “brotherhoods” of the region.

(e) Islamic culture and its institutions thus evolved into a relatively supple social framework for West African development, one marked both by a common core and by numerous local adaptations and “colorings”.

The effects of European conquest

The invasion of the European powers, which turned in the late 19th century from control of trade and external commerce to actual occupation of West African territory, effectively muzzled a simultaneous effort on the part of Islamic rulers and brotherhoods in the region to extend their own influence and develop subcontinent-wide bases of power. Early colonial leaders -- and the French in particularⁱⁱⁱ -- therefore generally saw in Islam a serious rival, and sought to neutralize it by restricting the construction of schools and mosques and supporting further fragmentation of the marabout movement into very localized religious fiefdoms. Later colonial leaders gradually developed a policy designed to use and subvert Islam, in which certain networks of marabouts and imams were rewarded for acting as transmission belts for administrative policy.

Early and late, European-language schooling was promoted as an antidote to Islamic learning and a vehicle for the transmission of “civilized” culture. As one result, leaders of African Islamic culture in many areas of West Africa came to see these institutions as “the white man’s school” and to identify them implicitly or explicitly as seedbeds of heresy and immorality. During the present century, Islamic education in West Africa has had to compete with Western education. Through mid-century, the number of Koranic schools steadily diminished as the number of western schools increased; but Muslim culture received in some areas new impetus at the time of African independence from its identification with resistance to colonial rule, and it acquired increased momentum in the 1980s and early 1990s with the weakening of the African state and the international example of militant Islam.

continues to spread in the subcontinent, nearly doubling its proportion of Senegalese adherents in the last 40 years. It has become a major influence in the acculturation of urban migrants.

Though the situation differs markedly from country to country, the numbers and proportions of Muslims continue to grow throughout much of the region. In Senegal, the percentage of the population reporting itself as Islamic grew from under 50% in 1950 to over 90% in 1990; and in Mali fully one-quarter of formal primary school students were in Islamic institutes (*médersas*) by the mid-1980s (Bray & Clarke, 1986). Traditionally a phenomenon of trading towns and their rural hinterland, Islam has in recent years become a major force in the socialization and cultural adjustment of new urban migrants, who find little support in formal sector job markets and few public facilities to cushion the shock. At the same time, competition with Western educational institutions has spurred a number of West African nations to modernize and strengthen their systems of Islamic education. Key institutions for this have been the Islamic University in Khartoum (Sudan), the Islamic Institute in Dakar (Senegal), the Islamic Institute of Higher Learning in Boutilimit (Mauritania) and the Islamic Education Center in Kano (Nigeria).

The structure of a submerged system

This system of Islamic learning in West Africa has three branches and three tiers, roughly portrayed in Table II.

The system of Islamic learning across West Africa is several-tiered though less rigidly structured than its Western counterpart. In addition, it now includes a traditional track (the Koranic sequence *per se*), a formal school or “modern” equivalent (Franco-Arab schools, sometimes called *médersa*), and intermediate or hybrid forms often referred to as “improved Koranic schooling.” At the base of the traditional network are the “*maktab*” or Koranic schools^{iv}, the primary level of the system, where children begin, starting somewhere between the ages of 3 and 10, to learn the Koran and the basic duties of Islamic life. Next come the “*madris*” or secondary schools where those who have essentially memorized and transcribed large portions (at least) of the Koran progress to a study of what is referred to as “Islamic science” (*ilm*), including the written traditions of the religion and a variable amount of other didactic material. A few select students proceed beyond this level to advanced study either with famed imams and marabouts of the region or at Islamic universities in North Africa and other Muslim countries. The entire system can be roughly represented in the manner portrayed in Table II.^v

		Varieties of Islamic Education			
		Traditional (“Koranic”)	Hybrid (“Improved”)	Formal (“Modern”)	
Levels of Islamic Eductn	Elementa y	<i>maktab</i> (primary Koranic)	“improved” Koranic school	<i>médersa</i>	
	Secondar y	<i>madris</i> (secondry Koranic)	(little developed to date)	<i>médersa</i>	formal sec schl
	Higher	affiliation with renownd scholar	Tertiary training in North African or Arabic universities		Tertiary trng in Eur-lang. univ.

Table II: Branches and levels of Islamic education in West Africa

Traditional Koranic schools are the base and most broadly-spread component of the system.

The traditional Koranic system is by far the most widespread branch, as well as the historical predecessor and base of all the others, and it is the one with which we will principally deal in this report. Reference will be made, however, to the other two varieties, both because they are acquiring increasing importance and because West African Islamic leaders themselves regard these as the “better quality” branches of the system and the ones that may serve as models for renewal of Muslim learning in the region. Of these other two forms of Islamic instruction, the *médersas* are the oldest, the first such Franco-Arabic formal schools having been created in 1946 by colonial authorities, both as an effort at compromise between Islamic and Western education that might satisfy the requirements of both and as a means for deflecting the momentum of Koranic schooling. They generally offer the standard formal school curriculum plus Koranic studies and Arabic language as their curriculum, and include learned marabouts on their staff. “Improved” Koranic schools are a more recent phenomenon. This term covers a variety of initiatives taken by international organizations like UNESCO and Unicef, by national governments and by certain NGOs either to introduce additional curricula into some of the best of the existing Koranic schools or to blend the two forms of education outright. They are usually accompanied by teacher recruitment and training programs designed to upgrade the qualifications of Islamic educators.

The operations of Koranic schools

The vast majority of boys and a large proportion of girls in Muslim communities begin Koranic school at a young age.

The vast majority of children in Muslim communities are enrolled in Koranic school at a young age, on a basis that coincides with their times of availability. Some study full-time, at least during the nonfarming seasons of the year. Others, like those also enrolled in Western schools, participate part-time, often in the evening after their other duties. Though parents try to place their children in what are perceived as the best Koranic schools -- that is, the ones held by reputed scholars and benevolent masters -- there are no formal requirements for starting a school other than having attended one oneself and no pedagogical training for teachers. In addition, in smaller rural communities there may be little choice: the local “marabout” has the monopoly, or the village is served by itinerant scholars.

Girls typically spend less time in Koranic school than boys, partly due to household duties and marriage expectations, though instruction may be carried on in the home.

Effective participation rates at the elementary level are higher among boys, however, than among girls, particularly in rural areas, in part because the “available time” of the female members of the household is more fully absorbed by household chores and -- though average marriage age is rising -- they have traditionally been expected to leave the family by adolescence. There is one mitigating circumstance to this rule: thanks to the relatively flexible nature of Islamic instruction and the lack of particular entry requirements, the roots of the network lie right in the household itself. Marabouts or apprentice marabouts may conduct classes within households for those who cannot easily get out, and family members with some level of previous instruction may carry on their own tutoring for their kin and neighbors. This method obviously does not lend itself, however, to any sort of advanced study on the part of the house-bound.

Overall only 5-15% of entrants complete even the

Drop-out rates in the initial Koranic instructional sequence are high -- 85-95% on average never fully complete the primary cycle of studies, concluding with memorization of the entire Koran and receipt of the *isnad*, a diploma of

full first cycle of instruction.

However, non-completers may meet the underlying religious socialization objectives of instruction, and study may be resumed again at any point in life.

There are numerous ways of sequencing a basically unitary curriculum built around the Koran, but no standard "grade" system.

Curriculum focuses on the Koran and the religious duties of Islamic life. The scientific and mathematical subjects of ancient Muslim education have been dropped or postponed to the secondary and tertiary levels.

Moreover, elementary Koranic schooling in West Africa is

completion for this first level -- but drop-out does not have the same meaning in the Koranic system as it does in the Western one. For one thing, the purpose of the instruction is as much to expose participants to the Holy Book, to socialize them into the faith, and to teach them their essential duties as it is to confer any particular diploma or level of literacy *per se*. This religious objective may be admirably achieved even by those who do not complete the prescribed cycle. For another, there is no rigidly prescribed time for completing each level of instruction, and Koranic learning may be -- and often is -- resumed at any point in life.^{vi} As with Christianity and Judaism at many points of their own history, the daily devotional life of the faithful Muslim is taken to be a gradual process of learning and enlightenment, and all religious festivals are marked by meetings and sermons meant to serve, *inter alia*, as forms of continuing education. In fact, the age expectations most discussed, and sometimes criticized, in West African Islam are those designed to slow down and deepen instruction, like the stipulation in certain regions that the student may not commence study of the *ilm* before 40 years of age, or the traditional norm among Fulani peoples that no one may teach before passing the age of 42.

Curriculum and organization

There is no precise grading system, though different traditions and brotherhoods may subdivide progress toward the end-point of primary Koranic schooling in varying ways. But there is a roughly similar staging of instruction, more fully spelled out in some cases than in others. The version used in the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea, one of the "hauts lieux" of Islamic learning in West Africa, is portrayed on Table III hereafter as instructive and illustrative, though more elaborate than the norm. A degree (*isnad* in Arabic) is generally granted at the end of this primary cycle of instruction, and the student receives a turban and a copy of the entire Koran that he or she has transcribed.

The curriculum of traditional Koranic education focuses, of course, on the Koran -- the original word of God, delivered in the chosen language of God -- and on the religious duties of Islamic life. Nothing in the Koran itself, however, specifies just what this curriculum should be. Contents have been defined by tradition and by historical and cultural adjustment, though there has been a recurrent concern to ensure that these remain faithful to the spirit of Islam and to a solid tradition of interpretation and understanding of the Holy Book. Significantly, early forms of Islamic education in Arabia and North Africa included scientific subject matter: astronomy, natural science and mathematics in particular. This breadth of focus did not always survive transitions of history and geography, however.

Instruction in science and math -- which, in any case, required well-trained teaching personnel -- gradually eroded over the early centuries of Islamic expansion. A first reactionary offensive 150 years after Mohammed's death, and a second around 1500 CE (i.e., at the precise time when Islam was spreading into subSaharan Africa) mostly eliminated scientific subject matter from the curriculum. As for mathematics, the close association in many devout Muslim minds between numbers and the cabalistic arts -- a constant temptation for Islamic literates due to the demand for such services, particularly from non-Muslim neighbors -- caused them to fall into disrepute.

As a consequence, the core Koranic school curriculum is largely limited to memorization and transcription of the Holy Book and to related religious socialization. Children tend to learn numeracy only to the extent that it is picked up from chapter and page numbering in the Koran itself. A few

seldom literacy instruction per se, since texts are learned in a language that few - including the marabout -- actually master.

schools introduce portions of the *ilm* or “Islamic science” curriculum at the primary level, as is currently done in Egypt -- that is, broader exposure to Islamic traditions and history and, potentially, in a renovated program, to mathematics and natural science as well -- but most leave even the pared-down version of *ilm* study to the secondary level. As Goody has pointed out (1966, p. 214), primary Koranic learning in West Africa is not even literacy instruction per se, given that the linguistic medium is a language foreign to students and one which the instructor himself or herself often has not fully mastered. In addition, through a degree of accommodation to, or hybridization with, existing oral traditions in pre-Islamic Africa, Koranic instruction in West Africa has typically adopted a group recital format: Koranic schools in any community can generally be easily identified because their students may be heard chanting verses in asynchronous chorus from some distance away.

Level	Content of Studies	Remarks
(1) Baa	Learning of Arabic consonants	All children should master at 6 or 7 years of age.
(2) Sigui	Learning of vowels and syllable composition	Children typically reach this stage at 7 or 8.
(3) Finditu	Learning to read/recite Koran in three steps:	Around 3/4ths of entrants expected to attain this stage.
A.	114th down to 88th <i>sura</i> of Koran	<i>Naassi</i> to <i>Laalè</i> .
B.	87th down to 67th <i>sura</i>	<i>Khassiati</i> to <i>Tabaara</i> .
C.	Remaining <i>sura</i>	Completion takes at least 2 years beyond “Sigui”.
(4) Lintagol	Rereading and revision of Koran	This stage still taught in most major communities.
(5) Firugol	Translation and interpretation of Koran	Leads to a diploma called “Thierningol” and is considered pre-requisite to inclusion among “the wise ones” of the village.
(6) Higher	Further exegesis of Holy Book plus other subjects like Arabic grammar, mathematics and astrology.	Only available in major centers of Islamic learning within the country.
(7) Specialized	In particular areas like occult sciences, poetic incantation, applied theology and apologetics, etc.	Only available in specialized centers. May be taken concurrently with (6).

TABLE III: Sample configuration of levels of Koranic learning from upland Guinea

The reductionist character of Koranic instruction is, however,

Sources of flexibility

Several factors, however, moderate this reductionist tendency in Islamic instruction in West Africa.

- (a) First, the curriculum tends to have some degree of vocational content

mitigated by several factors:

First, the curriculum has some vocational content;

Second, Arabic writing is semi-phonetic. It can be and is used to transcribe several of the vehicular languages of West Africa.

Third, as community leaders and affiliates of Islamic commercial and authority networks, marabouts “socialize” their charges into a number of important aspects of adult life.

-- over and beyond the obvious one of potentially leading to a position as marabout -- if only because Koranic students and their teachers must earn their subsistence. Parents are generally expected to contribute something to the upkeep of the marabout (and certain marabouts have become very wealthy through their associations and dealings with commercial networks and local authorities) but on the average, and particularly in rural areas, the funds contributed in thiswise do not suffice to sustain both the teacher and the students. Many teachers carry on therefore a trade on the side: bonnet weaving, agriculture, artisanry, some form of commerce, in addition to what they may make from teaching and miscellaneous religious services. In fact, the majority of those in rural areas are, of necessity, farmers first and religious clerics in their spare time. Students are frequently expected to contribute to the breadwinning, either by begging alms or by joining in the economic activity itself -- and in the latter case they receive at least a modicum of vocational training at the same time as they undergo their Islamic education. In the larger and better-established Koranic schools (like Daara Qu’ran in Dakar) vocational opportunities for students are further developed by internship with artisans of the informal sector or in the commercial networks to which the school is connected.

- (b) Though Arabic is a foreign language for nearly all students (and teachers) in West Africa, Arabic script is at the same time a semi-phonetic technology for writing (“semi” because not all vowels are marked and some sounds in West African languages are not directly represented), and one that has other potential uses. As early as the XVth century, literate West Africans began working out transcriptions for several of the region’s most widespread languages in Arabic script, inventing or combining letters where necessary to represent sounds particular to them (like the implosive “b” or “d” in Hausa). Well-established systems for Arabic transcription of Hausa and Western Fulani -- both called “ajami” -- exist and are endowed with a considerable written literature; and the Wolof language of Senegal is also written in these characters, a system called “wolofal” or “wolofaw”.^{vii} Speakers of these languages, then -- perhaps the three most widely-spread ones of the Sahelian region -- often acquire literacy in this code in the course of their Islamic instruction even if they never attain a level in Arabic that would permit them to communicate easily in writing.^{viii}
- (c) Marabouts are most often at the same time community leaders, closely allied with local authorities and commercial networks, and they therefore are able to socialize their charges to a number of aspects of adult life over and beyond the strictly religious ones. In fact, part of the disaffection with formal primary schooling and the surge in interest in different varieties of Islamic learning in Sahelian countries over the last ten or fifteen years is directly linked to the fact that formal schooling no longer gives automatic access to government jobs, whereas the Islamic clergy are perceived as being well connected to other sources of employment. At the same time, as much of the history of these regions is linked to the development of Islam -- through charismatic figures like ElHadj Umar, Othman Dan Fodio, Amadou Bamba Secko, ElHadj Tall -- Koranic training

Fourth, though numeracy is mostly absent from the basic curriculum, the widespread use of Arabic writing for commercial transactions gives it importance.

Finally, there are many pressures for reform and improvement within the system.

Overall, Muslim education serves both to preserve the integrity of the Islamic culture and community and to integrate its charges into existing social and economic networks.

becomes as well one important avenue for discovering one's roots and establishing cultural identity.

- (d) Arabic-based numeracy is much less widespread but nonetheless significant. Its narrower base appears to be due to the fact that mathematical manipulations are associated in the "marabout" culture with geomancy and divination and so scrupulously proscribed in a number of schools. This effect seems to be in part offset by the historical and current importance of commercial activity and marketing as a vehicle for the spread of Islam. In short, there are influences within the African Islamic culture that probably "draw out" more of the latent numerate competence than one would expect by noting the thin treatment of the subject in the schools themselves. In addition, most marabouts manage to acquire basic numeracy skills in the course of their continued studies.
- (e) Finally, the multi-dimensional nature of the Islamic education system, with its formal and "improved" branches and its connections to major centers of learning in West Africa and throughout the Islamic world, means that there are recurrent pressures and important examples for improved and broadened practice.

An evolving system

The evolution of Muslim education has responded to varied and sometimes contradictory political and social currents. Muslim education has at times been used as a bulwark against encroachment of "modern" or Western values and has at times been touted as the "fer de lance" of non-Western modernization. As a consequence, this century has seen a variety of movements devoted to reforming and updating it. Some of the richness and variety of this tradition is recounted in Annex II. There is, in fact, a considerable resurgence or interest in renewal and reform of Islamic learning systems throughout West Africa.

Overall, Muslim education can thus be seen as having at least two broad socio-economic functions over and beyond its core religious ones: it serves to preserve the integrity of local Muslim culture from influences that might weaken the faith, i.e. to integrate and socialize members of the Muslim community to their shared culture; and it serves to integrate students into existing economic networks. It should be noted that these functions are not necessarily inimical to economic development and may indeed nourish such development, depending on the willingness of both government officials and local community leaders to find common ground in their search for strategies to achieve the goals of national development.

Foreground: Learning Outcomes and Practical Applications of Koranic Schooling

Field studies served to amplify and test the results of the document review...

Field studies conducted in Guinea, Mali, Niger and Senegal offered an occasion to "ground-truth" or verify some of the generalities about Islamic instruction and its applications derived from the literature and to begin obtaining the sort of empirical data on learning outcomes and practical uses of this kind of training that is so scarce in published material. In the section to

..but were handicapped by two significant factors:

(1) the current sensitivity of anything concerning Islamic movements; and

(2) reticence on the part of interviewees to consider the "practical" applications of Islamic learning

The practical implications and applications of Koranic learning appear, therefore, both massive and largely unrecognized.

A number of key observations were nonetheless made:

follow, we report the most significant observations made during the field work, followed by illustrative data. A couple of significant difficulties encountered in carrying on the field studies should be mentioned first, however, because they are directly linked to the topic itself.

Our investigation of the practical applications of Koranic instruction was handicapped by two factors which have major significance in and of themselves.

- First is the political sensitivity in these countries of anything concerning Islamic movements and their relations with State functions, an issue dating from colonial times when Islamic instruction was seen as a potential seedbed of counter-culture and political opposition to French rule.^{ix} It is apparently for related reasons that directors of the international research program which in recent years has touched most closely on this issue -- the multi-country study of "diversification of the educational field" carried out in the 1980s under IIEP aegis -- were told midway through their work by UNESCO superiors to drop the Koranic school issue.
- Second is the fact -- experienced in each of the countries under consideration -- that Islamic leaders themselves tend to minimize or even resent the notion that Koranic instruction has practical implications or that students might be (implicitly) motivated by these. For them, the situation is clear: Koranic learning is an imperative in Islam for personal salvation, and it is for the greater glory of God and the deepening of one's spiritual life that students undertake such study. This attitude is evidently reinforced by the fact that, particularly in the realm of elementary Koranic schools, the "practical application" that most readily springs to mind, because widely exercised and often marketed, is divination and related magico-religious arts, much of it borderline sacrilegious in the eyes of devout Imams.

The central issue of this study is therefore framed by a contradiction: On the one hand, large proportions of the population in the areas concerned have undergone some level of Islamic instruction, and people semi-literate or literate in Arabic transcription of African languages and numerate or semi-numerate in Arabic form show up regularly both in responsible positions within development projects and in nonformal education and literacy programs. On the other hand, both students and teachers in Koranic schools make little of this and seem to give scant attention to practical aspects of the instruction. In fact, one of the reproaches made to current forms of Islamic learning in West Africa by Muslim scholars and historians themselves from these same countries is that dimensions of instruction that are countenanced by the Koran and part of the tradition -- like science, vocational training, mathematics and the like -- are rarely taught.

Current characteristics of a far-flung system

Field researchers were nonetheless able to broach the topic with quite a variety of Koranic students, former students, teachers and leaders in both urban and rural settings (composition of sample indicated in Table I above). The most important of their discoveries are summarized and supported below:

Our field results confirm the very extensive nature of the Islamic schooling network: over 40,000 schools in Niger alone.

Participants are highly aware of Islam's long history in West Africa.

Within the system, both quality and approach vary considerably.

The teaching personnel are sometimes among the most influential and richest people in local society.

The vast majority of children in predominantly

1. **The widespread nature of Koranic education:** The first observation of relevance arising from the data is that at least in its elementary forms -- represented by local Koranic schools -- Islamic learning is very widespread throughout the regions and countries under consideration. An estimate of the number of such schools in Niger in 1990 put them at 40,000; in Mali, over and beyond the network of Koranic schooling, *médersas* account for 25% of formal school enrollments. This form of education constitutes in reality an alternate and (to official and Western ideas) largely hidden knowledge culture rivaling -- and frequently intersecting or hybridizing with -- the official one, even though in most African countries the basic institutions of the system -- the *maktab* -- have not been considered as schools at all.
2. **The long history of Islamic learning in West Africa:** A second fact that stands out clearly in all the inquiries is that Koranic students, teachers and believers in general throughout the regions visited are highly aware of the long history of the faith in West Africa and of many of its greatest scholars and teachers. In short, there is a strong trans-national culture at work here that cultivates deep allegiance.
3. **Considerable variation in nature, sequencing and quality of instruction:** Despite these tendencies toward uniformity in underlying religious culture and basic orientation, the nature and quality of instruction in Koranic schools and the Islamic system as a whole vary noticeably from one region to another. Some regions (e.g. the Futa Djallon, the Macina, the region of Kano and Sokoto...) are widely known for the excellence of their schools; but even within towns and cities differentiations are made among different schools, accentuated by the habit in Islamic learning of apprenticing oneself to a noted scholar. There is therefore some customer control or demand response at work. The imams and marabouts that are most respected are those that have studied in Sudan, North Africa, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula or Iraq; but centers of excellence are recognized throughout West Africa and help to hold together what is truly a regional network.
4. **Certain marabouts and brotherhoods of marabouts have developed and exercise major political and economic power in the countries concerned.** One brotherhood is commonly believed to have determined the last Senegalese presidential election by its influence and to have been rewarded with extensive tracts of public land. Those involved for years in the cash crop trade in Niger, Mali and Senegal have developed well-capitalized commercial networks with ramifications in urban real estate and industry, and increasingly abroad. All this considerably strengthens the attraction of different forms of Koranic education as gateways to an alternate and sometimes thriving economic and political system.

Indicators of "internal efficiency"

5. **Access and equity:** In all areas visited, the vast majority of children do attend Koranic school. In a few regions, moreover, the proportion is virtually as great among girls as among boys, as in the areas visited in

Islamic areas attend Koranic school. Boys outnumber girls in most regions, but not heavily until higher levels of instruction. Increasingly, a marriage premium is put on young women literate in Arabic script.

A good proportion of male students who continue beyond the rudiments of Koranic learning do reach the secondary level.

the Republic of Guinea (see Table III). Elsewhere, boys are in the majority, but in many cases in ratios of 3/2 or 2/1. Only in one case were ratios higher than that found. Differences were more systematic in regard to the *level* of study attained: boys regularly were found to attend longer and reach a higher range of Islamic instruction than girls, which would explain why, with few exceptions, much smaller proportions of women were found to be functionally literate in Arabic script (ajami or Arabic language). However, it was frequently remarked that women trained in Koranic studies were considered desirable wives. One village visited in Senegal even had a reputation as a source of ideal brides because the vast majority of its girls and young women were well schooled in Koranic studies. There are few female marabouts, but the phenomenon is not unknown and may even be on the increase. A well-known voluntary association in Bamako founded by a woman literate in Arabic who made the pilgrimage to Mecca on several occasions, Hajya Tall, has been very active in organizing and instructing women of urban neighborhoods over the last fifteen years.

5. **Student flows:** The “depth” of Islamic instruction in the regions visited is quite variable, but in general a significant proportion of male students who remain beyond the initial Koranic lessons do continue to some level of higher study, whereas few women do. Table III below gives an idea of the progression ratios of small samples interviewed in Guinea and Niger. It should be remembered that all those contacted were students who had spent enough time in Koranic instruction to now be considered “alumni” of this type of schooling; so the proportions are not necessarily representative of the population as a whole.

LEVEL	GUINEA				NIGER
	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Men
Primary	0	75	72	91	2
Secondary	22	0	20	9	16
Tertiary	55	0	0	0	6
TOTAL	77	75	92	100	24

TABLE IV: Koranic instruction levels among students in Guinea and Niger

Practical literacy, however, is generally found only among the minority who have persevered, or

Demonstrable learning

6. **Literacy and numeracy outcomes:** Since understanding of either modern or classical Arabic over and beyond the Koranic texts themselves is quite rare, (except among those having pursued studies in Arabic-speaking countries), the highest levels of practical literacy -- that is, ability to read and write correspondence, keep records and generally communicate in writing -- are most frequently found in those areas like

more widely in regions where African languages are transcribed in Arabic characters.

Numeracy is seldom present in the curriculum, but most marabouts have picked it up and many use it in local accounting functions.

Though vocational training is seldom an explicit part of Islamic instruction, the need for students to earn their way and the economic roles of marabouts lead both to a number of internship opportunities and some notable abuses.

upland Guinea, the Sine Saloum of Senegal, and the Hausa-speaking regions of Niger, where there is a developed system for transcribing African language with Arabic characters. Quite partial data from our inquiries in Guinea, Senegal and Niger give some basis for estimating the percentage of the adult population in the communities visited that is in effect literate in some form of Arabic script. In Guinea, 93% of the sample of 77 male Koranic “alumni” interviewed claimed reading and writing capacity in Arabic script. In Senegal, between 25% and 75% of male adults in villages contacted, and between 10% and 25% of women claimed the same level of learning. In all cases, the proportions were well -- if not multiples -- above the literacy rate in French. The standardized Arabic alphabet devised by UNESCO is, however, nearly unknown at this local level.

As for *numeracy*, in most regions, it does not enter the curriculum of Koranic instruction until the secondary or higher level, as evident in the Guinean program of studies illustrated above (Table III), and so only directly concerns a relatively small minority of students. Only 26% of the Guinean sample of former Koranic students considered themselves “numerate” as compared to 93% who considered themselves able to write texts in *ajami*. A majority of marabouts and imams seem nonetheless to have acquired these skills, and this helps in understanding the frequency with which they are found to be handling accounting responsibilities in community affairs. In both Niger and Mali, however, it was remarked by the researchers and their interviewees that one of the main reasons why so many former Koranic students show up in government- or NGO-sponsored literacy courses is that they hope to get there the instruction in numeracy and math that is lacking in the elementary Islamic curriculum.

7. **Technical and vocational outcomes:** Our researchers all note that, while vocational initiation is not an explicit curricular component of Koranic schooling, most students who continue beyond the most elementary level (learning the *fatiya* or reaching the “sigui” level in the Guinean curriculum illustrated above) do end up working in some apprenticed position either to the marabout or to an affiliated craftsman or merchant, if only to help pay for his or her upkeep and tuition. Only in a few cases does this inclusion of part-time work experience take the form of what might be called genuine vocational education, and in some situations on the other end of the spectrum it simply involves begging or is an outright form of indentured servanthood. The quasi-enslaved situation of more than a few “talibés” in Senegal has been recurrently in the media; and the sing-song call of Koranic students requesting *sadaka* (alms) on the streets in Niger and northern Nigeria is an accepted part of the “sound track” of those communities^x. But Koranic students in upland Guinea rarely beg, almost always performing some kind of apprenticeship, generally agricultural; and there are a number of instances of joint Islamic-technical institutes in cities like Dakar. *In toto*, therefore, Koranic schooling tends to include a practical element integrated into the community, though only systematized as real vocational instruction in exceptional cases; and Koranic students are imbued with the notion that they will need to fend for themselves or find appropriate sponsorship beyond a certain age. This prompts one of our Senegalese researchers to remark, “*L’école coranique forme des*

The rote learning of Koranic studies itself has practical uses; the program provides models for task-oriented organization of time; and it is a solid moral reference.

Writing correspondence and giving Koranic instruction are the most widespread individual uses of training, but Koranic students show up in a variety of other public functions.

At the collective level, Koranic

créateurs d'activités, alors que le système formel forme des demandeurs d'emploi" ("Koranic schools train employment-creators, while the formal system trains employment-seekers.")

8. **General intellectual and moral development:** Our researchers all remark, in line with the findings of Scribner and Coles (1972), that the penchant for memorization in Koranic schools does not only have negative consequences. Students develop sometimes prodigious capacities for memory and recall of detail which can then be exercised in practical domains like inventories and historical reconstructions. In addition, the highly time-ordered regime of Islamic piety tends to induce a level of self-discipline and time organization that may have other applications. As the lead researcher in Guinea remarks,

La conscience du temps qui passe et la programmation de la journée en tranches d'activité sont au coeur de la pratique islamique. Cette religion impose à ses adeptes un rythme de comportements structuré autour de ... blocs de temps... Cette carte du temps impose un rythme au musulman et le rend conscient du temps dans une société qui n'a connu que très récemment la montre.

[Marking the passage of time and programming the day's duration into periods of activity are at the very heart of Islamic practice. This religion requires of its adherents a rhythm of behavior structured around...blocks of time...Such a "map" of time imposes a rhythm on the Muslim believer and makes him conscious of time in a[n African] society which only recently became familiar with the watch.]

In the moral realm, all observers agree that, despite examples of hypocrisy no less frequent in the African Islamic tradition than in that of any other religion, Koranic training reinforces the strict moral teachings of the faith and is a generally-accepted reference for future public service.

Applications of Koranic training

9. **Individual applications:** The most frequent secular application of Koranic learning at the individual level is writing and correspondence, and the most prominent career destination of accomplished Koranic students is to become themselves marabouts or imams as there is considerable demand for teachers and dispensers of religious and incantatory services, given the rapid expansion of West African Islam in recent years. Over a quarter of the Guinean respondents, however, cited the exercise of local public functions as a practical outcome of their training, and similar trends are evident across the region. Though statistically speaking the percentage of Koranic students who acquire sufficient knowledge of numeracy to assume accounting functions is very small, the proportion of people actually playing this role who have a background in Koranic education appears to be quite high. In other words, people with Islamic training constitute a major part of the still-thin *cadre* of clerical, accounting and administrative personnel at the local level.
10. **Collective applications:** Islamic morality, jurisprudence and authority have been used as the backbone of traditional governance for centuries

learning is the basis for much local juris-prudence and governance. Central government and NGOs are just beginning to call upon these resources.

Overall, Koranic schooling appears to have three major dimensions of practical application:

(1) It constitutes an introduction to the technology of writing.

throughout the Sahel. In fact, most of the vocabulary in major Sahelian languages (Wolof, Fulfulde-Pulaar, Soninke, the Mandingue group [Bambara-Malinke-Dyula], Songhai-Zarma, Hausa, Kanuri, Tamasheq) having to do not just with religion, but with laws, local administration, diplomacy and higher learning as well is derived or directly borrowed from Arabic. And, as pointed out above, traditional forms of both intraregional and international commerce have historically been in the hands of an Islamic elite. The applications of Koranic learning to social and economic life, at least outside Western networks, are therefore many and manifest. In addition, there is a spotty but increasing tendency among governments, NGOs and donor agencies in West African countries to have more systematic recourse to Islamic networks and authorities for purposes of local development and conflict resolution, as examples from the Republic of Guinea featured in Boxes 1 and 2 illustrate.

The consequence of these factors is that basic Islamic instruction -- of the kind dispensed in local Koranic schools -- seems to have three essential dimensions of practical application and impact in the areas visited during the study:

- It constitutes an introduction to the technology of writing -- and, to a lesser extent, that of numeracy -- for a sizable proportion of the population, both men and women. Those who proceed far enough to gain fluency in reading, writing and calculating for daily practical purposes (generally in some African language, as functional knowledge of Arabic itself is even more restricted) constitute overall a minority, though a sizable one in some areas. Moreover, literacy in Arabic script has become a point of reference in many rural and small town settings thought of as largely "illiterate" in Western terms.

Box 1.

Community Development through Arabic Script Literacy in the Republic of Guinea

Niagara is village in the Mamou region of Guinea which once had important religious functions. Among its 1000 residents is a former national Minister now retired to his native heath. This person was instrumental in starting a community development association based in the local Mosque which undertook the construction of a route linking the village to regional centers and subsequently branched out into establishment of health facilities and schools. Auditors from the national government and foreign aid agencies discovered that accounting for all activities had been scrupulously kept in *ajami*, the Arabic transcription of the Pulaar language. This system was subsequently spread to the entire network of local village associations of the immediate region, then to 22 agricultural mini-projects managed by regional government services, and finally, in 1992, to all administrative affairs and correspondence of the local development administration in Mamou. Courses in the standardized UNESCO transcription for Arabic script writing of African languages is taught to all comers in the Niagara primary school after normal class hours. (See examples of Arabic script printed materials in Annex III.)

(2) It is a school

- It is a training as well for local leadership, since solid Islamic

for religious and social leadership.

(3) It provides an alternate avenue for economic and political advancement.

instruction is generally accepted to be an indicator of morality, honesty and discipline and therefore a primary qualification for assuming positions of responsibility.

- In addition, it has always been -- and, given recent disaffection with formal schooling, has increasingly become -- an avenue for social and economic advancement because of the close relationship between Islamic networks and traditional commercial ones throughout the region. Koranic school graduates are more likely to find employment or apprenticeship with traditional merchants and in informal sector marketing operations.

Box 2:

Peace-making functions of Islamic organization in Conakry

In February 1996, the Guinean Army went on a violent strike against the government over unrequited demands for salary increases. The National Assembly, the court system, the civil service, and law and order all simultaneously broke down and looting and vandalism were committed all across the capital, Conakry. The government appealed to the imams and other religious leaders to restore order. The population was convoked to mosques and places of worship, Koranic verses and Islamic traditions exhorting unity and brotherhood were read, government delegations were hosted, and religious leaders exhorted their flocks to return all stolen goods after prayer the following Friday. There was, in fact, a massive restoration of the pillaged material at the mosques, government was able to resume its functions and the soldiers returned to their barracks.

Relations between Koranic schooling and other forms of basic education are poorly understood.

Yet they are real: many Koranic students show up in nonformal education programs.

There is some de facto competition among primary

Relations with other educational systems

Just as the practical applications and implications of Koranic learning are real but little recognized by its personnel, so also the relations between this form of education and others in evidence at the local level are substantial but mostly unavowed and uncoordinated. The strongest unofficial ties have been formed between Koranic schools and literacy or nonformal education on the one hand, and between Koranic schools and informal sector commercial activity on the other. In the first case, numerous former Koranic students show up in literacy instruction for several significant reasons:

- (a) Given their background in Arabic transcription of African language, the phonetic Western alphabets used in these centers for African language literacy pose relatively little problem
- (b) They tend to appreciate the enlarged and more development-relevant curricula of literacy and nonformal education courses, particularly the math instruction and the practical exposure to development topics like cooperative accounting and health care.
- (c) These courses often become an avenue for entry into the leadership of new local associations and cooperatives.

In the second case, traditional commercial networks constitute an outlet for employment of Koranic school leavers, one further reinforced by the fact that the ElHaji's of each locality (those having made the pilgrimage to Mecca) are

schools NFE programs and Koranic instruction, but more benign neglect.

largely composed of well-to-do members of this merchant class.

Our researchers note, however, more instances of competition among primary schools, nonformal education programs and Koranic schools at the local level than of active or constructive cooperation, though by far the most common situation is a general lack of contact and coordination among them. Indirectly, however, there appears to be a great deal of crossover: students of one show up in the other, curricular and pedagogical modes are imitated (rote learning in primary school, addition of new curricular elements in Koranic schools, transitions to French in nonformal education).

Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

Two issues stand out in conclusion: (1) the nature and potential of Islamic instruction; and (2) lessons learned about research concerning it.

The primary purpose of this study has been to contribute to ongoing assessment of the degree to which and the way in which existing networks of Islamic instruction in the countries surveyed constitute -- or could constitute -- a reservoir of human resources for decentralization and local development and a complementary avenue of Education for All. Two issues of importance are involved at this point: first and foremost, a substantive one concerning the nature and potential of Islamic instruction; and second, a methodological one, which concerns how best to get an accurate "reading" of that poorly understood reality. In the remaining pages of this paper, conclusions will be drawn and practical recommendations made with respect to both.

The Substantive Issue: Islamic Instruction as a Reservoir of Talent

Substantive issues are the most important. Several conclusions can be drawn and related recommendations made.

Systems of Islamic learning have major impacts on human resource development in Sahelian regions. Many more people are literate in this medium than in European languages.

Conclusions

1. Islamic schooling has major but largely unrecognized impact on human resource development in Sahelian regions. Though practical (and generally African language) literacy, numeracy, and vocational training are not often targeted and sometimes eschewed, they are nonetheless produced -- and, given the large numbers and even proportions of people involved, the intermittent patterns of participation and substantial attrition rates which characterized these programs do not prevent considerable cohorts of literate and semi-literate, skilled and semi-skilled graduates from being trained. We encountered numerous communities with very low levels of Western schooling (or none at all) where upwards of 50% of the adult male population and from 10% to 25% of the female population was functionally literate in Arabic script. One might even say that the quickest and most cost-effective way to increase literacy rates in many areas of the West African interior -- to do so virtually overnight, in fact -- would be simply to declare this system of writing a legitimate alternative form of literacy for survey and census purposes!
2. A relatively dense network of Koranic schooling covers interior areas of West Africa and continues to spread. In reality, elementary Koranic schooling, secondary instruction and the varied forms of higher training compose a single system that can be viewed as at least subcontinent-wide, although the lower reaches of this structure are not considered valid educational institutes by most governments. In terms of traditional

The countryside is covered by a relatively dense network of Koranic schools. They

may seem “inefficient” in Western terms but achieve their ends.

Women are underserved but not excluded.

Scientific, literacy and mathematical subjects have traditionally been neglected but are due for a comeback.

Whatever its current shortcomings, the system will remain a major factor in human resource mobilization.

Policy-makers should pay greater heed to the potentials of this system and of Arabic script communication.

Intervention strategies should focus initially “on the demand side” -- that is, on finding ways to employ Arabic script competence in development management..

educational assessment criteria, the “internal efficiency” of the programs, and of Koranic schools in particular, is low; but the system is arguably quite effective in attaining its principal religious socialization objectives and offers a framework for lifelong and recurrent learning that may produce in the long run what is not easily measurable in the short term.

3. Women are distinctly underserved in Koranic education, particularly in the higher forms of study, but they are not excluded from it, given that instruction typically stretches into hearth and home and may be resumed at any point in life. There are examples of learned women scholars and the proportions of girls in intermediate Koranic instruction seem to be growing.
4. Koranic instruction offers a place for learning of literacy and numeracy and even for scientific study, but these subject matters have mostly faded from the curriculum for historical and doctrinal reasons and for lack of qualified teachers. There is, however, an increasingly widespread desire to update the program of teaching and learning in order to include subjects which are, after all, prominently taught in the schools of North Africa and the Arabian peninsula, the more so as current trends are giving Koranic schools more important vocational roles than they have had heretofore.
5. Overall, when the social and moral status of Islamic learning is added to its present and potential learning outcomes, it is clear that this partly-submerged training system -- if it can be called such without danger of blasphemy -- is and will remain a major factor in any effort to decentralize development functions, grant increased responsibility for social and economic functions to local communities or associations, and mobilize the requisite competence. It is the oldest region-wide educational system and the one that has to date demonstrated, despite its conservative reputation, the greatest adaptability to local conditions.

Recommendations

1. The first and perhaps most important recommendation is that decision-makers in government services, NGOs and donor agencies simply think more explicitly of Koranic school networks in interior regions of West Africa as a real component of the basic education system and the local human resource development capacity. A practical corollary to this new realism and respect would be inclusion of literacy in Arabic script as a component of overall literacy rates in the country, and active consideration of usage of this system as a means of official written communication in areas of high incidence.
2. Given the sensitive issues involved, efforts to increase the contribution of Islamic instruction to local development concerns and education for all priorities should probably start “from the demand side” -- that is, by making a place for the use of Arabic script in the management of development operations, developing interchange and crossover between the two codes for African-language literacy, and, in effect, “challenging” the clients and beneficiaries of Islamic instruction to put their learning to these communal uses and simultaneously to develop its collateral practical content.
3. Successful strategies of this type -- like the Niagara community example from Guinea -- should result in increased opportunity to act “on the supply side” by helping Islamic instruction networks to upgrade the quality and

Coordination among Koranic schools and other providers of basic education is highly desirable but to be achieved locally - though central encouragement can help..

Research of this nature must be participatory and could be made still more diagnostic.

Participating African researchers could benefit from more such "praxis" opportunities.

Two related facts are worth noting:

(1) The central notion of the study proved nearly as counter-intuitive for researchers as it did for interviewees.

(2) Determining actual learning outcomes will require in the future a more

effectiveness of their training and better integrate them with other forms of basic education and vocational training. Support for teacher training and curriculum development will be key modalities.

4. Coordination between sponsors of Islamic education and the other providers of basic education seems more likely to come about through parallel responses to increased "demand-side" opportunities than through any government- or foreign aid-sponsored effort to organize the sector. Local actors are probably best placed to begin refashioning the variety of basic education facilities in their midst -- primary schools, nonformal education course, Koranic training, apprenticeship systems -- into a loosely coordinated network for more effective human resource development, though central encouragements and dissemination of best practice examples can certainly help. Students have in fact started "coordinating" things for themselves, since crossover among the systems and "shopping" for needed instructional sequences has become quite common.

The methodological issue: Assessing the skill and knowledge "yield" of Islamic instruction

1. Any study of this nature needs to be undertaken in a participatory vein, and the considerable interaction with Islamic scholars and students that was achieved in each of the four countries, despite time pressures and limited resources, is one of the strengths of the research. Future efforts might concentrate on making the research even more explicitly part of a participatory assessment of present systems of Koranic learning by their staff and clients and a joint consideration of reform opportunities.
2. This said, much remains to be done in giving participating African researchers the opportunity to do this kind of study, to benefit from on-the-job technical support, to get constructive feedback and criticism, and to use the experience as an occasion to strengthen their own competencies. Researchers were often not used to operationalizing topics to the level of detail and data specification that this effort required, and several iterations were in some cases needed to get beyond generalities.
3. Two related characteristics of the work accomplished this time around are also worth noting, as they are relevant to future iterations of this kind of research:
 - First, it turned out to be almost as hard to get researchers to concentrate on the skill and knowledge application issues as it did the Islamic interlocutors themselves. In future efforts, it might be best to approach the research itself from the demand side as well -- that is, by starting with some of the principal contexts where people use Koranic knowledge to practical ends, like village associations, traditional market networks, and local income-generating activities, and then seeing how those involved acquired and now use their skills. Qualitative tracer studies or ethnographic interviews of this type would be very helpful.
 - Second, it was difficult to pin down the levels and types of literate and numerate competence actually acquired by students through descriptive interview with stakeholders; and in a subsequent iteration it would be advisable, time and resources permitting, to devise and pretest a simple set of instruments for assessing competence levels in Arabic literacy, Arabic-

developed
testing
mechanism.

But the topic
has demon-
strated real
potential and
deserves to be
further pursued.

transcription African language literacy, and numeracy. The Guinean team made some important first strides in this direction, and the ideal solution might be to hold an operational seminar on the topic where all concerned could develop and test methods together.

4. Finally, the topic clearly appears both critical and unexplored enough to merit further investigation. That work should be carried out by African researchers in direct collaboration with Islamic African educators. It will be important, however, to spend more time on development of research designs and discussion of underlying issues, and if possible on joint critique of results and methods.

Endnotes

ⁱ Reading, writing and strategies for religious instruction are, however, not presented *per se* in the Koran, though as the “Word of the Most High” it represents in and of itself an obvious endorsement of the importance of literacy. The prominence of clerics and teachers within the Islamic movement is in good part an historical phenomenon: Since “spiritual direction” (*al-hudâ*) is the central theme of the Koran, it might ideally have been expected that Islamic rulers (the *khalife*, who, as temporal successors to Muhammad, exercised political power) would both serve both as examples and enforcers of the true faith. They soon proved, however, to be quite subject to the classic temptations of power and inclined to immerse themselves in its perquisites. A class of clerics and teachers (*imam*, or leader for prayer; *fuqaha*, or scholar; and *qadi*, or legal guide) thus grew up both to remind those in power of their responsibilities and to spread knowledge of the faith and the Koran among their subjects. This function, already important in Arabian and north African early Islamic history, took on additional importance with the spread of the faith into subsaharan areas where Arabic was not the language of daily communication and where backsliding into traditional African religions and allegiances was a constant spiritual and temporal concern .

ⁱⁱ The term “marabout” is also sometimes taken to derive from the Arabic *morâbit*, or “soldier-monk”.

ⁱⁱⁱ English colonial authorities tolerated a degree of indirect rule and local autonomy in governance, and in this process ended up collaborating in various ways with the Islamic hierarchy in those particular parts of their territory that were under Muslim influence. The French, on the other hand, had a more centralized pattern of colonial rule and their territory coincided to a greater degree with the Islamized regions of the West African interior. They consequently felt more threatened by this source of potential resistance.

^{iv} “*Makarantar allo*” (school of the wooden slate) in Hausa, “*daara*” in Wolof., and a variety of other Arabic derivatives in other African languages.

^v It should be noted that the use of terms here often does not correspond either to their root meaning in Arabic or to the institutional meaning they presently have in North Africa or the Arabian peninsula, since the words have frequently been assimilated and given related meanings in West African usage, sometimes differing from one region to another. So, for example, in a dictionary sense, the term “*medersa*” in Arabic simply designates a place where learning takes place.

^{vi} There are, nonetheless, different traditions regarding appropriate time sequences in different areas and cultures of the region. Among the Fulani of the central Sudan, for example, where in any case the number seven has a particular significance in all time computations, the normal duration of studies leading to recital of the entire Koran is fixed at “seven years, seven months and seven days.”

^{vii} Systems for writing African languages in Arabic script have traditionally been somewhat idiosyncratic and personalized, each marabout having a slightly different manner, for example, of transcribing the sounds that do not exist in Arabic itself. In recent times, the Bureau Régional de l’UNESCO à Dakar (BREDA) has spearheaded several attempts to standardize the Arabic characters used for African language-specific sounds.

^{viii} Several other West African languages are also transcribed to some extent in Arabic characters, though the practice is of more recent origins. The Soninké language in Mali and the Malinké language of Guinea and Mali both use Arabic writing in this manner. On the other hand, the Toucouleur and Pulaar peoples of Senegal, who are part of the larger Fulani ethnic group, do not have a tradition of *ajami* writing.

^{ix} The current relevance of these issues was graphically illustrated once again in May of 1997 when President Mo'amar Qaddafi of Libya went to Niger on a State visit and, in his remarks to the press, said it was high time francophone West Africa dropped the French language in favor of Arabic. The reaction from Western embassies was frosty.

^x “*Malam, sadaka -- Ga almajirinka na Allah*”: “Alms, good sir -- Here’s your [Koranic] student from Allah.”

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ANNEX I

Specification of Study Focus Given to Participating Researchers

L'enseignement islamique, et notamment les réseaux d'écoles coraniques dispersé à travers une grande proportion de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, constitue un système d'éducation dont les tenants et aboutissants ne sont pas très bien connus mais qui fournit à bon nombre de ses élèves et étudiants, une alphabétisation pratique en écriture arabe et des éléments de formation dans bien de domaines en plus de l'instruction religieuse qui représente sa principale raison d'être.

L'objectif de cette étude est de cerner tant soit peu, la portée pratique de l'instruction coranique: les types de connaissances et compétences pratiques acquis par ceux qui suivent ce cycle de formation jusqu'à différents niveaux et l'utilisation qu'ils en font au plan de leurs activités économiques, sociales et culturelles. On se souciera d'abord d'apprécier même très approximativement, l'ampleur de l'instruction coranique comme système de formation dans le pays en question: son implantation à travers le territoire, les divers paliers d'enseignement y compris les éventuels branchements sur des cycles "supérieurs" dans d'autres pays, le "curriculum" enseigné en plus des matières religieuses, les nombres d'apprenants aux différents niveaux et leurs caractéristiques prépondérantes, et l'évolution de ces paramètres dans le temps.

On tâchera ensuite -- et notamment dans les pays qui sont les sites principaux de cette étude -- de déterminer dans un petit échantillon d'endroits quels sont les connaissances et compétences pratiques effectivement acquises par les élèves à différents niveaux du système, quelle proportion acquiert cette compétence, comment ils s'en servent, quel est le degré de participation des anciens élèves de l'école coranique dans les nouvelles activités génératrices de revenu nées ces dernières années des courants de décentralisation et de l'intervention des ONG, et quels sont les rapports entre ce système et ces adeptes d'un côté et les autres systèmes de formation en présence -- école formelle, alphabétisation, autres activités d'éducation nonformelle, et/ou pratiques d'apprentissage et d'exode -- de l'autre.

ANNEX II:
**Evolution of African Islamic Education
in the Twentieth Century**

Far from being a static phenomenon, Islamic instruction, like the religion itself, has evolved in important ways in the course of this century marked at its outset by widespread colonial rule. Thus, for example, the rural inland madrasahs of the Digo peoples of southern Kenya have increased greatly in number since the Second World War as a direct result of the perceived spread of Christian or secular customs emanating from the coastal Swahilis (Brenner, 1993). In other areas Muslim schools have adapted to competition with a Westernized model of education by admitting some non-Muslim subjects into the curriculum - often mathematics and English - in an attempt to keep Muslim schooling 'relevant'. The Ahmadiyya, an Indian based Islamic movement that has established a presence in parts of West Africa, has enjoyed some success in promoting a 'modern' anglophone Muslim education that incorporates elements of the secular Western curriculum such as science, math, world history and geography in addition to Islamic religious studies. The Movement has had considerable success in Ghana and The Gambia in gaining members from both Muslim and Christian communities and has developed strong secondary school programs, technical schools, and hospitals in those areas (Skinner, 1983; King, 1971).

To counter the influence of the Ahmadis (whom many African Muslims regard as unorthodox) certain northern Nigerian and Yoruba Muslims established schools of their own where an anglophone education is offered. Closely connected to this trend is the emergence of the Ansar al-Din, Helpers of the Faith, a Muslim association that seeks to counter the influence of both the Ahmadis and the Christians in the fields of education and welfare and which is noted for its readiness to adopt Western style education (King, 1971).

But this adaptionist process has not been entirely unilateral on the part of Muslims. Secular government schools in Nigeria, for example, faced with strong opposition from well established and powerful Muslim interests in the north, have incorporated Koranic school subject matter into their primary school curriculum and have allowed it to be taught by traditional Muslim teachers. In some Nigerian states public school curriculum is linked to Islamic school curriculum through the junior and senior secondary school levels, as well (Reichmuth, 1993; Hubbard, 1975;).

Although supporters of secular, public school education are accustomed to characterizing Muslim education as irrelevant to the modern world and inimical to the development oriented, nation building agenda of less developed nations, such characterization of Muslim schooling is not necessarily accurate. Traditionally in West Africa there has been a close connection between Islamic education and commercial activity, especially cash crop production and long distance trade. The shift from subsistence production to cash cropping and the development of trade networks stimulates the demand for literacy and numeracy - a demand that Koranic education has traditionally filled (Harmon, 1992; Wilks, 1968). Indeed, from the perspective of local businessmen Western education itself is sometimes seen as irrelevant: for example such education can lead to the neglect of local arts and crafts for which there is still demand. Some Muslim schools also engage in apprenticeship training in

practical job skills such as tailoring or accounting. To enter such professions through a Muslim educational system often involves undergoing a two or three year apprenticeship during which the student lives and works with his master, learning not only the skills of his trade but the theory and practice of Islam. This period of training often includes becoming part of a local commercial network which will often provide the novice entrepreneur with his first capital or credit, his social life, as well as the common spiritual bond of the Islamic brotherhood (Brenner, 1993). In contrast, graduates of government sponsored secular schooling are sometimes seen as having no concrete skills. Such youth often migrate to the cities looking for low level clerical work - a process which both weakens the social and economic structure of rural areas and which aggravates chronic overpopulation and unemployment of the large urban centers.

Apart from charges of curricular irrelevancy, modern educators have commonly criticized Koranic school pedagogy for its emphasis on rote learning as opposed to development of higher order thinking skills. Very little research has been done in this area, however. Two studies which do address this issue, one which examines adults in Liberia (Scribner & Cole, 1981) and another which examines pre-school and elementary students in Morocco (Wagner, 1993) both concluded a) that Islamic schooling has a statistically significant and positive effect on serial memory and b) that other cognitive skills are unaffected compared to students in non-Islamic schools.

ANNEX III:
Sample Training and Accounting Forms
in Fulani Ajami from the Niagara Project in Guinea